Vera Brittain's about feminism and women's role the war

SH.Choriyeva¹

¹Uzbek State World Languages University, English teacher, Uzbekistan

Email: choriyeva_sh@umail.uz

ABSTRACT

This article describes wartime and the role of the woman of the American writer Vera Britten in society, the position of women in wartime, the image of a woman, their human qualities and their various manifestations, from appearance to character.

Keywords: Feminist, feminism, wartime, women characteristics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism- the theory of the political, economic, and social equality of the all categories, organized activity on behalf of women's rights and interests.

Vera Brittain was associate English author, feminist and pacifist, United Nations agency wrote the most effective mercantilism "Testament of Youth" associate account of her traumatic experiences throughout the primary warfare. Vera Brittain was born twenty-nine Gregorian calendar month 1893 in urban center to a moneyed family United Nations agency in hand paper mills. Once learning at a private school in Kingwood, Surrey, she visited Somerville faculty, Oxford to check English Literature. Once she was eighteen months previous, her family captive to Macclesfield, Cheshire, and once she was eleven years previous, they captive again; to the spa city of Buxton in Derbyshire. Growing up, her solely brother Edward was her nearest companion. From the age of thirteen, she attended private school at St Monica's, Kingswood, Surrey wherever her auntie was the principal. Overcoming her father's initial objections, she read English Literature at Somerville College, Oxford, delaying her degree after one year in the summer of 1915 to work as a Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) nurse for much of the First World War, initially in Buxton and later in London, Malta and France. Her fiancé Roland Leighton, close friends Victor Richardson and Geoffrey Thurlow, and her brother Edward, were all killed in the war. (Mark Bostridge (21 May 2012). "Vera's Testament is young again". The Daily Telegraph.) Their letters to each other are documented in the book Letters from a Lost Generation. In one letter Leighton speaks for his generation of public school volunteers when he writes that he feels the need to play an "active part" in the war. (Brittain, Vera (1998). Letters from a Lost Generation. London: Little, Brown and Company. p. 30.)

Returning to Oxford once the war to scan history, Brittain found it tough to regulate to life in postwar European country. She met Winifred Holtby, and an in depth relationship developed, each meaning to become established on the London literary scene. The bond lasted till Holtby's death from nephrosis in 1935. (Mark Bostridge (15 March 2012). "The story of the relationship between Winifred Holtby and Vera Brittain". The Daily Telegraph.) different literary contemporaries at Somerville included: Dorothy L. Sayers, Hilda Reid, Margaret Kennedy, and Sylvia Thompson.

In 1925, Brittain married martyr Catlin, a social scientist (1896–1979). Their son, John Brittain-Catlin (1927–1987), with whom Vera had a tough relationship, was AN creative person, painter, bourgeois, and author of the life Family Quartet, that appeared in 1987. Their female offspring, born 1930, is that the former Labour cupboard Minister, currently Liberal Democrat peer, Shirley Williams, one in all the "Gang of Four" rebels on the rightist of the Labour Party World Health Organization defected to found the SDP in 1981.Brittain's first published novel, *The Dark Tide* (1923), created scandal as it caricatured dons at Oxford, especially at Somerville. In 1933, she published the work for which she became famous, *Testament of Youth*, followed by *Testament of Friendship* (1940)—her tribute to and biography of Winifred Holtby—and *Testament of Experience* (1957), the continuation of her own story, which spanned the years between 1925-1950. Vera Brittain wrote from the heart, basing many of her

novels on actual experiences and actual people. In this regard, her novel *Honourable Estate* (1936) was autobiographical, dealing with Brittain's failed friendship with the novelist *Phyllis Bentley*, her romantic feelings for her American publisher George Brett Jr, and her brother Edward's death in action on the Italian Front in 1918. Brittain's diaries from 1913–17 were published in 1981 as *Chronicle of Youth*. Some critics have argued that *Testament of Youth* differs greatly from Brittain's writings during the war, suggesting she was more in control when writing retrospectively. (*Ouditt, Sharon (1994). Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War. London: Routledge. p. 33.)*

In the 1920s, she became a regular speaker on behalf of the League of Nations Union, but in June 1936 she was invited to speak at a peace rally in Dorchester, where she shared a platform with Dick Sheppard, George Lansbury, Laurence Housman, and Donald Soper. Afterwards, Sheppard invited her to join the Peace Pledge Union. Following six months' careful reflection, she replied in January 1937 to say she would. Later that year, Brittain also joined the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship. Her newly found pacifism came to the fore during World War II, when she began the series of Letters to Peacelovers. She was a practical pacifist in the sense that she helped the war effort by working as a fire warden and by travelling around the country raising funds for the Peace Pledge Union's food relief campaign. She was vilified for speaking out against saturation bombing of German cities through her 1944 booklet Massacre by Bombing. In 1945, the Nazis' Black Book of nearly 3,000 people to be immediately arrested in Britain after a German invasion was shown to include her name. (Berry, Paul and Bostridge, Mark, Vera Brittain: A Life, 1995, ISBN 0-7011-2679-5 (p. 445).)

From the 1930s onwards, Brittain was a regular contributor to the pacifist magazine <u>Peace News</u>. She eventually became a member of the magazine's editorial board and during the 1950s and 1960s was "writing articles against <u>apartheid</u> and <u>colonialism</u> and in favour of <u>nuclear disarmament</u>". (Loretta Stec, "Pacifism, Vera Brittain, and India". <u>Peace Review</u>, vol. 13, no. 2, pp. 237–44, 2001.)

In November 1966, she suffered a fall in a badly lit London street en route to a speaking engagement. She attended the engagement, but afterwards found she had suffered a fractured left arm and broken little finger of her right hand. These injuries began a physical decline in which her mind became more confused and withdrawn. Around this time the BBC interviewed Vera and she was asked of her memories of Roland Leighton, tragically she replied "who is Roland"

Vera Brittain never fully got over the death in June 1918 of her beloved brother, Edward. She died in <u>Wimbledon</u> on 29 March 1970, aged 76. Her will requested that her ashes be scattered on Edward's grave on the <u>Asiago</u> Plateau in Italy – "...for nearly 50 years much of my heart has been in that Italian village cemetery" (Paul Berry in the foreword to *Testament of Experience*, 1980 Virago edition.) and her daughter honoured this request in September 1970

2. PRACTICAL PART

"...Although the first dressing at which I assisted – a gangrenous leg wound, slimy and green and scarlet, with the bone laid bare – turned me sick and faint for a moment."

- Testament of Youth

Vera was also conscious of the role women were playing in the war. It was the first time women were accepted in many areas of work that had previously been the preserve of men. In many ways, the contribution of women to the war effort was crucial in advancing the case of women's suffrage. However, at times, she felt the role of women in the war was underplayed.

"Kingsley's idea that men must work and women must weep, however untrue it ought to be, seems in one sense fairly correct at present."

- Letter to Roland Leighton, 17th April 1915

For Vera Brittain, then, it was on to deployment as a VAD, or Voluntary Aide

Detachment programme participant. While much has been made of this as an obvious or natural decision on her part, she was actually quite hesitant at the outset. Inasmuch as her idealist temperament and high personal standards came into play, at least one author has asserted "she had become convinced that nursing was the path demanding the hardest work and the greatest degree of self-sacrifice, and that it was through nursing that she could best live up to the sacrifice that Roland and her brother were making as

soldiers" (Gorham, 100). Thus nursing for her was the most sensible way to assert her budding political and ideological beliefs, rather than merely a

job or civic duty. Indeed nursing also held allure ideologically as "members of the nursing units were meant to have the same status as male commissioned officers, and were to be of an equivalent social class" (Gorham, 101). She may not be able to be a soldier due to her perceived

lesser status as a woman, but she would have the closest opportunity available for status.

Nursing duties and the day to day job of a VAD were far from glamorous. "Nurses have long complained that others do not understand their work, which involves the most difficult and demanding issues of life and death – both exaggerated during war" (Roberts and Group, 114). In addition VAD assistance during World War I was accepted warily, arguably begrudgingly, by trained nurses. Many of these tensions arose due to class differences, the hierarchical structure of the profession, and the fear on the part of trained nurses that VAD participants may prove to be job competition post war (Gorham, 104-106).

Nursing itself was, and is, primarily a female dominated occupation, and, as such, often questioned as a profession. In the minds of some, nursing represented the ultimate expression of accepted femininity of the time - "the explicitly feminine image of the nurse as comforter of the wounded male" (Gorham, 116). In a feminist analysis of military nursing, however, women were in fact placed into a unique position of power in relation to the male soldiers for whom they cared. This interpretation was not lost on the general public; rather it was a constant, if somewhat taboo, threat to social norms. "behind the positive image there was a powerful, less openly acknowledged negative image of the nurse as the female devourer of male strength" (Gorham, 116). The fact that women nurses were more prevalent during World War I than ever before only exacerbated this ambiguity (Roberts and Group, 124). Vera Brittain herself could not have been completely oblivious to the political underpinnings of her decision to serve as a VAD. Arguably the seeds of her three most passionate causes - feminism, pacifism, and nuclear nonproliferation - found fertile ground during her time in military service. "Brittain, some feminist pacifists and the more successful of the VADs had faith in the argument that the war, even if it was a manifestation of a particularly brutal kind of masculine madness, created space for women to work, think and practice as artists" (Ouditt, 217). Brittain's highly successful writing and speaking career is in fact primarily built upon her experiences during World War I and her reflection upon and resulting analysis of those times.

As did other feminist thinkers and writers of her time, Vera Brittain was faced with the task of deconstructing assumptions about women's minds, bodies, and character. During this time women as a whole were still bound by the belief that biology is destiny; women's primary function was to bear and raise children (Zangden, 38-39). Not to mention, women were viewed as fragile and inferior when compared physically with men. This bias extended to the mind as well, resulting in a worldview that at its core insisted women's place was in the home and nowhere in the public arena. "A woman was taken to be interested solely in domesticity and personal relationships, which were supposed to constitute her happiness" (Zangden, 39). Vera Brittain tackled this typecasting repeatedly in her writing, holding firm that women's minds were not inferior, merely untrained and traditionally unused. By opening up access to educational opportunities, females would perform on par with males. Her argument applies to perceived physical inferiority as well (Zangden, 41-42).

Brittain's main feminist thesis was her understanding that women's lack of social status and power stemmed from the belief that women were inferior. It was not a lack of skills or interest nor an inherent defect that led to the devaluation of women and her banishment to and isolation in the home. "The suppositions attached to women lead to specific expectations concerning their tasks and behaviour" (Zangden, 45). Vera Brittain refuted the common assumptions in her time that women's lives revolved entirely around wifehood, motherhood, and domesticity.

Also true to the prevalent tenets of feminism of her time, Brittain asserted that women had the right to marry, bear children, and pursue paid work outside of the home. Women deserved equal occupational rights and equal pay (Zangden, 59-61). In her thinking women were not superior to man and should thus be hired or promoted solely on the basis of their sex.

However no occupation or field should exist in which women could not partake. Obviously these reforms to marriage, childrearing, domestic life, and career pursuits could not be accomplished without

the cooperation of a suitable husband. Ideally men should modify their current behavioral norms accordingly. Fathers should spend more time with their children. Husbands should learn to fend for themselves and neither demand nor expect wives fulfill their every whim. In the workplace, men should share opportunities and historical privileges (Zangden, 69).

Feminist themes were present in her fiction as well as nonfiction works. Though often termed dated or old-fashioned, her novels are, again, existing within a specific historical context. Ever present is the "questing female hero," whose drives are autonomy and identity (Montefiore, 152). Though her plots may be technically conservative, "in the portraits of Brittain's female protagonists keywords of her feminist theory like full humanity, self-determined lives, self-confidence are on the agenda" (Zangden, 121). Her heroes may in theory be viewed as templates for her vision of a complete feminist woman. However, it must be noted that fiction is written to be sold to and read by a largely lay, versus academic, audience. Thus judging her stories and characters by a stringent and narrow theoretical lens diminishes her accomplishment of publication given the need for palpability to a wider, more conservative, audience.

3. CONCLUSION

In conclude, Vera Brittain's decisions regarding the rearing of her children and her refusal to completely abandon her career was characteristic of feminist thought in the interwar years. Women sought to integrate marriage and children along with careers. Part of the basis for this ideological strain in feminism was based upon the fact that men were rarely asked to choose between family and employment outside the home. Vera Brittain's personal and professional life demonstrate clearly the complexity of her character. She does not fit neatly into any one rigidly defined category, be it ideological or more concrete. Though she has been described with many labels – feminist, pacifist, internationalist – her life and works do not exhibit merely one main idea. Rather she reflects the uncertainty and ambiguity of the time in which she lived.

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